

Prepared Remarks of U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara
AAPI Convention
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Thank you for that kind introduction. It is an honor to be here.

I actually came to AAPI 28 years ago in 1987 when the conference was in Atlantic City. AAPI has become one of the largest conferences for Indian origin people anywhere in the country – exceeded now by, I think, only the annual conference for national spelling bee champions. Congratulations on all you do.

In my office, our mission is to keep our streets safe, our homeland secure, our markets fair, and our government honest.

In service of that mission, we do many important things: we investigate and prosecute gangs, terrorists, ponzi schemes like Madoff's, banks, civil rights matters, and public safety. Lately, we have been working on getting rid of the corruption in Rikers and prosecuting politicians in Albany.

Sometimes we prosecute people in the medical profession.

You may not think of me as a public health official, but in recent times, I have become deeply involved in the response to an important public health crisis.

It is the crisis of prescription pill overdoses. I know there has been a lot of debate and discussion in the medical profession about how to address this problem. But it is now both a law enforcement issue and a health issue. And it knows no boundaries. It's affecting affluent and poor communities in every state; it's affecting people of all races and all ages.

The numbers are harrowing. The total number of prescription opioid overdoses in the U.S. between 1999 and 2013 exceeded 175,000, which is three times the U.S. body count in the Vietnam War.

In 2013 alone, more than 16,000 people died from opioid overdoses—more deaths than from heroin and cocaine combined. Our teens are particularly susceptible to being lured into prescription pill abuse.

And consider also that prescription painkillers are widely considered a gateway to even more potent narcotics like heroin, and you begin to realize the scope and seriousness of this crisis.

Prosecutors in my office are taking this problem very seriously. Since 2012, we have charged roughly 50 defendants with crimes for the unlawful dissemination of prescription medications. And sadly, not a few of them were doctors.

But it is more than a prosecutor's problem – it will take not only holding bad actors accountable, but also public policy and public education. In fact, I'm taping my first PSA this Monday, and it is on this issue.

And that brings me to my main and simple point today, that is to encourage you to find still more ways to serve and lead – more ways to help fix all the problems in our country and in our world that you are so supremely well situated to confront.

What physicians do, every day, is extraordinary. Medical doctors are, by definition, in a service profession. You treat and heal and comfort people, for a living.

To solve our larger problems, we need the best minds – not just legal minds and political minds – but the best medical minds too. It is gratifying to see that happening more and more: Indian American physicians getting more and more involved in public policy roles; in political roles; in problem-solving roles. The examples are impressive:

- o Dr. Vivek Murthy, – by fighting to prevent premature death from disease.
- o Dr. Atul Gawande – by drawing attention to the causes of high health-care costs and deaths in surgery.
- o Dr. Siddharta Mukherjee – by bettering our understanding of the fight against cancer in his Pulitzer-prize winning book, the Emperor of All Maladies
- o Dr. Rajiv Shah – by leading the effort when he was at USAID to bring American aid to the places in the world most in need.
- o Dr. Ami Bera – by joining the debate on every issue important to his district and to the country as a Congressman from California.

These are preeminent physicians of Indian origin who are leaders not just in the examination room, but in the public square.

And that is heartening, because public policy and public office are not the sole province of lawyers or professional politicians.

In the end, we need healers who not only tend to the human body but also who can mend our body politic. And heal our society's fabric.

I already mentioned the crisis of prescription pill abuse. And you will hear from one of the most profoundly important public servants in the world – for saving children from enslavement. How such a problem can still persist in the modern world is crushing, but maybe not surprising.

After all, even with so much worldwide wealth, we still haven't even solved the problem of hunger. Long ago, Gandhi observed: "There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them, except in the form of bread." Almost a century later, that is still true. And there are other people in the world so poor or so sick or so downtrodden that God may not appear to them at all in any form.

And so why is service important? The answer is simple – because there are people in need, and this community is overflowing with the talent to help them. Muhammad Ali put it this way. He said, "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth."

I think there is also something of a special obligation of service for people like us –who have derived so much from being welcomed by America. And from time to time it is worth pausing to reflect on the journey from India to the United States and how privileged we are to be in this special place.

I think that, in this country, where more languages and cultures and cuisines coexist than anywhere else, we are all bound together in ways that too many of us don't fully appreciate.

There is so much diversity in this country – there is so much diversity even within any ethnic community – diversity of region, of religion, of social class.

But here's the thing, whatever country you come from; whatever name you give your God; whatever book you deem scripture; whatever rituals of religious faith you observe; whether you are Hindu, Sikh, or Muslim; whether you are orthodox or reformed; whether you are devout or lapsed; whether you pray or not, when you become an American, you are bound to every one of your fellows in the greatest country that has ever existed by a pious faith in enduring principles of liberty and equality and the rule of law.

That is the founding formula for our country, for our democracy, for our prosperity. That is the reason that people of all faiths and all colors and all cultures come here; that is the reason that those same people invest here and build here and stay here. That's the reason so many of you came.

That's the reason my own family came. And it is the reason that I am standing before you today – the son of a father who came from virtually nothing, who was born 75 years ago in a colony still ruled in the name of the King of England, who later absconded to the U.S. with barely pennies in his pocket and with a young wife and an infant son with an unpronounceable name – who, less than forty years later, somehow became the chief federal law enforcement officer in the financial capital of the world.

Now, how a kid like me, born in Ferozepur, raised in New Jersey, and named Preetinder Singh Bharara, can even have this position is almost beyond my humble power to process. And yet here we are. That says a lot less about me than it says about America. Part of the reason that this can be is that the United States has built a system of laws (even if flawed and frequently in need of repair) that enshrines the right to equal opportunity and embodies the sacred American ideal:

- o that every child – even a poor or orphaned or immigrant child – can rise higher than that child's parents could ever have imagined:
- o Whether to become the first Indian American court of appeals judge in the history of the republic, like Sri Srinivasan.
- o Or the first Indian American head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, like Vanita Gupta.
- o Or the first Indian American ever to lead USAID, like Rajiv Shah.
- o Or the first Indian American doctor ever elected to Congress, like Ami Bera.
- o Or the first Indian American, and youngest, Surgeon General ever – like Vivek Murthy.

These are phenomenal firsts – and they all happened in just the last few years. It takes your breath away.

And these are just some of the doctors and lawyers. Never mind the authors and artists, the scientists and soldiers, the actors and activists, the business leaders and political leaders and thought leaders – who hail from a distant subcontinent and yet aim to transform this continent because they transcend quaint and tidy stereotypes of what is possible.

And so I suppose that this is one relevant aspect of having a certain ethnic background – a first-time achievement within a community is something like a mini-moon landing.

It signals something to young people who may not yet know that their dreams can become reality too – even though they may have a funny name or an exotic heritage or a misunderstood religion.

So I suppose you have to acknowledge the power of an ethnic or racial first:

- o If Barack Obama can do it, then maybe I can too.
- o If Ami Bera can do it, then maybe I can too.
- o If Vivek Murthy can do it, then maybe I can too.

Ideally, though, one should be capable of being inspired without regard to common ancestry or ethnicity, because common humanity trumps all.

Consider, after all, that an American named Martin Luther King was inspired by an Indian named Mahatma Gandhi, who had himself been inspired by an American named Henry David Thoreau, who had himself been inspired by an Indian text called the Bhagavad Gita.

That is a cycle of inspiration that transcends race and religion and creed and color; and the mere fact of that cycle is deeply inspiring, if you pause to think about it even for a moment.

And so to me, a deep relevance of being an Indian immigrant is this – whether you are a doctor or a lawyer or a taxi driver: It should drive a deep feeling of obligation to give back to the country that gave you so much.

I agree with the adage that to whom much is given, much is expected. And I think that principle, in some ways, goes double for recent immigrants. Our families chose to come here; not everyone had that choice. They chose to come here on the promise of a better life and, if you are sitting in this swank hotel ballroom, by definition, that promise was fulfilled. And it is just too soon for people like us to take our country for granted.

And so for all of you, who have achieved so much; who have accomplished so much; who have produced so much – I hope you continue to find extraordinary ways to serve your fellow human beings.

We might not all win the Nobel Prize like Mr. Kailash Satyarthi – but we can be inspired by his example to serve in some small way ourselves.

Here is how Rabindranath Tagore put it: “I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.”

I hope we can all find further ways to serve. Thank you.

